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SUBJECT: CHINA MAKES PERMANENT THE LIMITED,
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REPORTERS

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey
Carlson for reasons 1.4 (B/D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Foreign correspondent and Chinese media contacts praised the October 17 announcement that the temporary, Olympics-related, relaxed rules governing foreign journalists were made permanent, though several interlocutors noted China remains a difficult place to work for reporters of all nationalities. The October 17 decision by China's leadership makes permanent the Olympics-related regulations allowing foreign correspondents to travel and work in China without first seeking permission from provincial Foreign Affairs Offices. As under the temporary regulations, Tibet remains off-limits, and our sources predicted that China's security apparatus will continue to use surveillance and other means to keep reporters away from sensitive areas. One media scholar told us the decision to make the Olympic rules permanent was made after the State Council Information Office concluded that allowing foreign journalists more freedom of movement did not significantly increase negative media coverage of China. Several domestic reporters argued that the newly permanent rules, while not applicable to the Chinese media, demonstrate China's commitment to greater openness. Chinese reporters, meanwhile, remain frustrated by official interference in their work, and one editor commented that the newly permanent rules increased the contrast between the less restricted working environment enjoyed by foreign correspondents and the continued restraints binding domestic journalists. End Summary.

A Last-Minute Announcement

[1](#)2. (U) In a late-night press conference October 17, MFA spokesperson Liu Jianchao announced the implementation of new permanent regulations governing foreign journalists and news organizations in China (ref A). The regulations, signed earlier that evening by Premier Wen Jiabao, replace 1990 rules and make permanent the temporary rules governing foreign reporters leading up to, during and after the Olympic Games that went into effect on January 1, 2007 (ref b,c), and expired October 17, just minutes after Liu's announcement. The most significant changes from the 1990 rules include:

-- Permanently eliminating the requirement that foreign journalists seek permission from local and provincial Foreign Affairs Offices (FAOs, known in Chinese as "waiban") before conducting reporting activities outside Beijing and Shanghai. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), however, remains an exception, and journalists, Liu explained, will still need to seek permission from the TAR FAO to travel there.

-- Reducing red tape related to credentials and temporary accreditation for short-term or non-permanent correspondents;

-- Explicitly allowing importation of "wireless communication gear" (such as satellite equipment); and,

-- Eliminating the polemics that foreign journalists must not "distort facts," "fabricate rumors," or "endanger national unity." The new rules simply say foreign journalists should respect "professional morals" (zhiye daode) and report "objectively" (keguan) and "fairly" (gong zheng).

Chinese Employees Cannot Be Correspondents

¶3. (C) The newly permanent regulations also grant foreign news organizations the right to hire local staff through the Diplomatic Services Bureau (DSB), an organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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(with branches in many provinces) that provides employees to foreign embassies, consulates and news bureaus. (Note: The 1990 rules made no reference to the hiring of local staff.) At the press conference, however, Liu clarified that Chinese citizens can only work for news bureaus in a supporting role and cannot function as reporters themselves. Contacts at several foreign news bureaus in Beijing told PolOffs the new language simply codifies existing practice whereby foreign news organizations hire local staff and then register the new employees with the DSB. Yu Xiaofei (protect), a Chinese employee at the Beijing bureau of the UK newspaper The Times, told PolOff that bureaus sometimes do not bother to register employees with the DSB. The only disadvantage of not joining the DSB, she said, is that unregistered employees are often denied credentials for the National People's Congress and similar official events.

Low-Risk Liberalization

¶4. (C) Tsinghua University School of Communications Professor Zhou Qing'an (protect) told PolOff October 28 that the Chinese Government decided to make the Olympics-related relaxations permanent after concluding that the old restrictions had little meaning. Foreign journalists, he said, have long ignored the rules that they must seek permission from local FAOs before traveling. In September, according to Zhou, the State Council Information Office completed an internal report that concluded the negative portrayal of China in the foreign news media did not measurably increase in the last two years despite the greater freedoms given to foreign reporters under the temporary rules.

¶5. (C) The report, portions of which Zhou said he read, also argued that the implementation of controls over foreign journalists was itself generating negative news stories. Zhou said the report specifically cited the deadly August 4 attack on a

People's Armed Police unit in Kashi (Kashgar), Xinjiang. International reporting of the incident, Zhou cited the report as saying, was overwhelmingly sympathetic to China until police assaulted two Japanese reporters trying to cover the attack. Zhou said the report was instrumental in the decision to make the temporary Olympics rules permanent. At the end of the day, Zhou said, Party leaders decided there would be little downside to making the temporary regulations permanent ("foreign journalists will talk to dissidents no matter what the rules say") and the move would improve China's international image. Zhang Xiantang (protect), a senior reporter at the China Economic Times, said the decision was ultimately a "face" issue for the Chinese leadership. With so much attention focused on China, Zhang said, it would have been "stupid" and "embarrassing" to restore restrictions on foreign journalists so soon after the Olympic Games were over.

Late Decision Indicates Controversy

16. (C) Contacts differed over whether the decision to make the temporary regulations permanent sparked serious debate within the central leadership. Dissident scholar Liu Junning (protect) told PolOff that he heard of a "split" within China's propaganda apparatus, with the Party Propaganda Department opposed to making the Olympics regulations permanent while the State Council Information Office supported doing so. Wang Chong (protect), an international affairs columnist for the China Youth Daily, said the last-minute announcement of the new regulations indicated that there was opposition to the decision. Some bloggers, meanwhile, have speculated that China's security apparatus opposed permanently relaxing travel restrictions on foreign journalists. Zhou Qing'an of Tsinghua, however, discounted the idea that there was heated debate over the decision. While there may have been difference of opinion between agencies, Zhou noted, CCP Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchun has firm control over the propaganda agencies and the regulations would not have passed if Li had objected.

TAR Leaders Oppose Opening Tibet to Reporters

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17. (C) Zhou, who has participated in several Tsinghua University programs to train Tibet cadres in media relations, said the decision to continue to restrict foreign journalists' access to Tibet was primarily a result of resistance from TAR officials. TAR leaders believe categorically that "all foreign journalists are spies," Zhou said, and the State Council Information Office continues to defer to the TAR cadres on this question. No Beijing official wants to risk advocating greater media access to the TAR, Zhou said, because they would be blamed if "a few journalists really did turn out to be spies."

Still Many Ways to Control Foreign Press

18. (C) Chistopher Bodeen (protect), a correspondent for the Associated Press, told PolOff the new rules, like the temporary Olympics regulations, do not mean Chinese authorities will give up on attempts to control foreign reporters. Following the March 14 Lhasa riots, Bodeen noted, China's security forces blocked international journalists from traveling to Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Gansu provinces even though these areas were technically "open." When

major events happen, he said, Chinese authorities will continue to block access in the name of "ensuring journalists' safety." Tsinghua's Zhou offered a similar prediction, saying state security agents will continue to use wire tapping, surveillance, and other "extra legal" means to keep tabs on the international media. Nevertheless, Bodeen and other foreign journalists said the lifting of the FAO permission requirements is helpful. A reporter with the British Broadcasting Corporation told PolOff in August that the relaxation "changed the power dynamic" between reporters and local officials. Journalists no longer need to hide from authorities, he said, "because we have a right to be there."

Frustrated Chinese Reporters Benefit Indirectly

19. (C) Domestic journalists we spoke to believe the newly permanent regulations, though having no direct impact on their work, reinforce the concept that all journalists have a right to report the news. Several local media contacts said the right to travel to the scene of breaking news has particular resonance with Chinese journalists following official interference in the coverage of two recent mine-related disasters in Shanxi province: an August 1 landslide in Lifan that occurred when a tailings pile collapse killed at least 41 people, and a September 8 mudslide in Xiangfen that killed over 250 people and was caused by the failure of a reservoir holding mine waste. In both cases local police attempted to prevent reporters from reaching the scene. (Note: In Lifan, officials originally portrayed the accident as a natural disaster and covered up the real death toll. The truth came to light weeks later when a journalist for the magazine Oriental Outlook (Liaowang Dongfang) broke the story on his personal blog. Several contacts told us attempts by the mainstream press to cover the accident were censored.) Zhang, of the China Economic Times, noted that reporters of local newspapers are most vulnerable to such restrictions because they are technically not allowed to report on news in other provinces. Journalists for national media outlets, he said, typically can go where they want.

10. (C) Lu Yuegang (protect), a reporter for China Youth Daily who was demoted in 2006 from his job as deputy editor of the paper's outspoken "Freezing Point" supplement, praised the permanent relaxation of restrictions on foreign journalists and said domestic reporters will benefit indirectly, especially when reporting on "sudden incidents" like the recent Shanxi disasters. If Chinese authorities are unable to restrict foreign journalists from entering a disaster area, Lu said, then they will also be less able to justify keeping domestic reporters out. Chen Hao (protect), the Editor-in-Chief of the International Herald Leader, a paper run by the Xinhua News Agency, told PolOff the newly permanent rules show that China is slowly moving toward greater openness. The

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international media, Chen added, has had a positive effect in pushing China toward greater press freedom. Chen, however, said he felt a tinge of bitterness because the new rules also highlight the increasing contrast between the relatively free working conditions enjoyed by international correspondents and the myriad censorship rules imposed on China's own journalists. Wang Chong echoed Chen's pessimism, saying the foreign reporter regulations "mean nothing" for domestic reporters who remain frustrated at the slow pace of liberalization. "It is tiring being a journalist in China now," Wang said, adding that he

often thinks of quitting the China Youth Daily and finding work with a financial news service, which would mean "more pay and less aggravation."

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